United States Department of Agriculture

Forest Service

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Scoping Document

Monitor Pass Habitat Restoration Project

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Carson Ranger District

Alpine County, California

Comments Welcome

The Carson Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest welcomes your comments on this proposal to restore and improve aspen stands located in the Monitor Pass area, as well as restore and improve habitat for the Bi-State Sage Grouse Population. This project area is located approximately 11 miles east of Markleeville, California. The legal description is Township 10 North, Range 21 East, sections 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 33, 34, 36 and Township 10 North, Range 22 East, sections 19, 30, and 31 of the Mount Diablo meridian. See Figure 1: Monitor Pass Habitat Restoration Project Vicinity Map.

The District has tentatively determined that this proposed project may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement pursuant to FSH 1909.15, Section 31.2(6) authorizing "timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction," (36 CFR 220.6(e) (6)). A decision memo is anticipated to be used to document the decision regarding this project proposal, unless effects to extraordinary circumstances are determined as outlined in FSH 1909.15, 30.0(2).

Background

The Monitor Pass Habitat Restoration Project analysis area is approximately 18,673 acres and occurs near the Monitor Pass area in Alpine County, California. Within this analysis area, the Carson Ranger District is proposing to promote aspen growth and re-establishment as well as improve habitat conditions for the Bi-State Sage Grouse.

Vegetation within the project analysis area is composed of quaking aspen stands, mixed conifer stands, open sagebrush and mountain brush areas, and pinyon-juniper woodlands. Aspen stands in the analysis area are currently declining in condition primarily due to conifer encroachment. Encroachment within these stands ranges from very heavy encroachment with relatively few aspen stems remaining to light conifer encroachment with few conifers existing within the aspen stand. If left untreated, conifers can out-compete healthy aspens for sunlight and nutrients, and eventually completely eliminate aspens from a stand.

The project area also falls within the boundaries of a designated Bi-State Sage Grouse Population Management Unit (PMU). Population Management Units are delineated land areas that describe occupied and otherwise important habitat for sage grouse populations.

One of the largest threats to the Bi-State Sage Grouse population includes habitat loss from pinyon-juniper encroachment. Similar to conifer in aspen stands, conifer encroachment in sagebrush can eventually replace sagebrush ecosystems and reduce habitat availability for sage grouse. In addition, conifers in open sagebrush stands act as perch sites for hawks and ravens which are predators of sage grouse. Pinyon pine (*Pinus monophylla*) and Sierra or western Juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*) are scattered throughout the project analysis area.

Sage grouse occurrence within the project area is somewhat unknown. Currently, sage grouse are believed to pass through the area during mid-summer while traversing from breeding grounds in the Pine Nut Mountains to higher elevation foraging areas (Coats per communication 2012). Sage grouse and sage grouse sign have been detected several times within the project area near the Leviathan Communication Tower. Habitat conditions in the Pine Nut Range have been diminished in recent years due to wildfire, drought, and other disturbances. This may result in an increased use of areas like Monitor Pass by sage grouse as they seek available foraging and breeding areas.

There are three active sheep grazing allotments within the project analysis boundary: the Leviathan, Cottonwood, and Campbell Loope Allotments.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose and need for this project is twofold: to enhance and expand existing aspen stands within the project area, as well as improve and protect important habitat for the Bi-State Sage Grouse population.

Aspen stands are currently in varying degrees of decline primarily due to conifer encroachment. Healthy aspen stands contribute to the long-term health of a landscape and are an important component of ecosystem functioning by performing roles such as material cycling, succession, habitat, etc. Aspen landscapes in the west provide numerous benefits, including forage for livestock, habitat for wildlife, watershed protection, water yield for downstream users, aesthetics, sites for recreational opportunity, wood fiber, and landscape diversity (Bartos and Campbell 1998). The proposed project will restore and enhance existing aspen stands in the project area by reducing conifer encroachment.

The Bi-State Sage Grouse Distinct Populations Segment (DPS) is currently proposed for listing as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act. One of the largest threats to the Bi-State population is loss of habitat due to conifer encroachment from pinyon and juniper. The proposed project will meet strategic objective listed in the 2012 Bi-State Action Plan by improving habitat conditions and helping to ensure the long-term viability of the Bi-State Sage Grouse populations.

Proposed Action

Aspen Enhancement

Competition for sunlight from conifers can be minimized by the eliminations of the majority of the encroaching conifers from within and adjacent to the aspen stand. Removal of conifers around the aspen stand for distances of approximately 1 ½ times the existing aspen height is optimal for aspen sprouting (Shepperd et al 2006). Under the Proposed Action, the removal of live conifers up to 30" diameter at breast height (DBH) will occur from within 100 to 150 feet from the edge of the aspen stands. Conifer removal around the aspen would be skewed so the opening would be greater on the south side and less on the north side of the aspen. Competition for sunlight from conifers can be minimized be the elimination of the majority of the encroaching conifers from within and adjacent to the aspen stand. Removal of conifers around the aspen stand for distances of approximately 1 ½ times the existing aspen height is optimal for aspen sprouting (Shepperd at al 2006).

Where conifer encroachment is heavier, conifers would be felled and removed utilizing contract and Forest Service crews and firewood contracts and permits. Prescribed burning may also occur in these areas if conifer removal alone does not adequately stimulate aspen regeneration. The slash from these activities would be piled and burned or chipped. Where feasible an air curtain burner may also be used to burn slash resulting from treatments. An air curtain burned is a large enclosed box that is used to burn slash. The slash is placed into the fireproof box, and a curtain of air is then placed over the top of the box. The curtain of air ensure virtually no smoke emissions escape from the box, as well as assisting the burning material to burn completely to ash with no large pieces left unconsumed.

Any large diameter "legacy" trees, or smaller diameter trees that exhibit legacy characteristics, would be retained. A legacy tree is a mature old-growth tree that provides a biological legacy, which is a biologically derived structure inherited from a previous ecosystem (Helms 1998).

Prescribed understory burning may be utilized to promote aspen growth and re-establishment. Prescribed pile burning may be utilized to treat activity slash. All prescribed fire treatments would be implemented or excluded throughout the project area as needed to meet resource needs.

In general, archaeological sites would be flagged and avoided during all phases of project implementation. However, under the direct supervision of an Archaeologist, some activities (e.g., small conifer removal, tree girdling, etc.) may be permitted within arboglyph sites as long as individuals trees containing arborglyphs are not damaged. The Decision Memo will contain direction and specific Management Requirements to avoid adverse effects to archaeological sites.

Once aspen stands have been treated through conifer removal, girdling, and/or prescribed understory burning, or livestock grazing would not be allowed until aspen regeneration reaches browsing height. Sheppard et al (2006) states that he generally accepted browse height for sheep is 3 ¾ feet. The Forest Service will coordinate with the permittee to develop an adjusted grazing strategy that will have minimal impact on current grazing operations while aspen regeneration in treated areas is occurring.

Bi-State Sage Grouse Habitat Improvement

To improve habitat conditions for sage grouse, portions of the project area will include thinning pinyon-juniper trees where encroachment is currently occurring in sagebrush stands. Treatment will consist primarily of removing pinyon-juniper trees from Phase 0 and I woodland succession areas. In Phase I areas, sagebrush, grasses, and forbs dominate the plant community, but small trees are present. Trees that are cut would be lopped and scattered, or piled and burned, masticated, or removed as firewood. Treatment method would depend on phase, location, and access. Any "legacy" trees would also be retained. Particular emphasis will be placed on treatment areas where sage grouse are historically known to occur. Prescribed burning may also occur in some areas to help stimulate shrub, grass, and forb recruitment within decadent sagebrush stands.

Project activities would not occur in aspen and riparian areas April through July to minimize potential disturbance to migratory birds.

Maintenance of the project may include prescribed fire and hand treatments to remove any conifer regeneration and may continue for approximately ten years after initial treatment.

How to Comment

Written comments must be submitted to: Irene Davidson, District Ranger; 1536 South Carson Street, Carson City, Nevada, 89701 or to the facsimile number (775) 884-8199. The office hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00-4:30 Monday-Friday, excluding holidays.

To provide electronic comments, copy the following web address into your browser's address bar: http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=46365 and click on the "Comment on Project" in the list of links on the right side of the web pages that opens. To submit electronic comments after the period for the comment web form ends on April 29, 2015, you should email your comments to the project contact as given under "Request More Info" on the project web page. Please use the term "Monitor Pass Project" in the subject line of your email.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and address of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

To by most effective, comments should be received by the Forest Service no later than April 29, 2015.

For further information, please contact Anna Belle Monti at 775-884-8103.

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Figure 1: Monitor Pass Habitat Restoration Project Vicinity Map